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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001991

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PRE-ELECTION VISIT TO ABKHAZIA - NEW
INTEREST IN ENGAGEMENT?

REF: A. TBILISI 1745
[1B.](#) TBILISI 1713
[1C.](#) TBILISI 1665
[1D.](#) TBILISI 1881

Classified By: DCM Kent D. Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶11.](#) (C) Summary and comment. During a meeting in Sukhumi with Department and Embassy visitors, mid-level de facto officials expressed openness to additional visits from U.S. officials, but were non-committal on waiving the requirement for a "visa" for more senior visitors. They also expressed seemingly sincere interest in engagement that avoided contentious status issues on both sides. They denied that Gali residents face human rights difficulties, but conceded that the authorities need to address the issue of their documentation and ability to vote. The de facto officials as well as civil society interlocutors said that the campaign for Abkhazia's "presidential" elections is not quite underway, but that the race will be about personalities rather than issues. The same interlocutors, as if reading from the same talking points, all showed very little flexibility on the issue of IDP returns, insisting instead on an accounting of those who have already returned to Gali and of the numbers and intentions of those still outside Abkhazia. They also explicitly linked returns to recognition of Abkhazia. Meanwhile Russian forces continue to take steps toward a more permanent presence in Gali, including the construction of buildings on an old school site in Nabakevi. Although these officials do not occupy authoritative, decision-making positions, we believe they do represent a real interest in renewed contacts with the United States. Their tough position on IDPs, however -- combined with the continuing entrenchment of Russian forces -- is an important reminder of current Abkhaz redlines. The similar hard line on IDPs taken by civil society representatives, considered by some to be among the more thoughtful Abkhaz on the issue, indicates the tough road ahead on this issue. End summary and comment.

DE FACTO OFFICIALS -- OPEN, BUT CAUTIOUS

[¶12.](#) (C) Viacheslav Chirikba, foreign policy advisor to the Abkhaz de facto "president," and Lana Agrba, head of the international relations department of the de facto "ministry of foreign affairs" -- both of whom participate in the Geneva talks -- met with visiting PRM desk officer and Embassy political officer on November 5 in Sukhumi. The procedure for entering Abkhazia, once again arranged by UNHCR, was the same as described in ref A. When asked about the travel policy, both Chirikba and Agrba said they were open to additional visits, including from Embassy officers on their own. Agrba in fact encouraged us to visit other parts of Abkhazia. The two did not confirm, however, that the de facto authorities' publicly stated policy of not allowing

visits from Tbilisi-accredited diplomats has changed. When asked in particular about the "visa" requirement for more senior U.S. visitors, Chirikba seemed to understand the sensitivity, but he did not offer a clear answer one way or another.

¶13. (C) Regarding the status question, Chirikba was pleased by Secretary Clinton's recent remarks in Moscow about the need for "status-neutral" steps in the conflict resolution process. He expressed concern, however, at the hard line taken by senior U.S. officials, including the Vice President Otken by senior U.S. officials, including the Vice President and the Secretary, that the United States would never recognize Abkhazia's independence. We suggested that, although we clearly disagreed on this issue, the disagreement should not become an obstacle to engagement; we should be able to set aside the status discussion for now and find areas of common interest. Chirikba agreed.

¶14. (C) In fact, both Chirikba and Agrba expressed what seemed like sincere interest in engagement activities with the United States. Chirikba agreed with us that we should seek to identify activities that avoid the status question. Agrba encouraged us to consider working on infrastructure projects, noting in particular the sorry state of the roads in Gali. Complaining that the international community seems to focus primarily on Gali, however, Agrba pointed out that other parts of Abkhazia also face difficulties. We said we would be happy to visit such places and consider their needs as we consider possible activities, noting that we were especially interested in considering the needs of communities receiving returns. Agrba also expressed interest in opportunities for advanced studies abroad.

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ELECTION OUTLOOK

¶15. (C) Chirikba offered an overview of the "presidential" election process. With the election itself set for December 12 (refs B, C), the official campaign is just getting underway. Chirikba listed the five candidates that have registered: incumbent "president" Sergey Bagapsh; former "vice president" and 2004 runner-up Raul Khajimba; businessman Beslan Butba; director of the "state steamship company" Zaur Ardzinba; and academic Vitaly Bganba. Explaining that a candidate had to receive 50 percent of the vote plus one vote to win, he said the first three were the most serious candidates, and that at this point it was not clear who was the front runner. He said that voters were likely to make their decision based on the personalities more than their positions on issues, explaining that there was not much difference among the candidates on the issues anyway. In particular on foreign policy, Chirikba said all candidates agreed on the importance of establishing Abkhazia's "independence," maintaining good relations with Russia, improving relations with Georgia, and establishing better relationships with other countries, such as Turkey. He thought that, even though some criticism of Russia and of Abkhazia's relationship with Russia has surfaced in civil society, none of the candidates would openly express such views.

¶16. (C) Chirikba also explained that, unlike in 2004, Gali residents now had to have Abkhaz "passports" to vote. With some 3,000 such documents distributed among the Gali population of 55,000 (in Chirikba's estimate), it was unlikely that Gali would have a big impact on the election. Chirikba acknowledged that the new regulation prevented most Gali residents from exercising their right to vote, but explained that the wide range of identity documents allowed in 2004 had led to serious problems with fraud in 2004. He also said, however, that only 6,000 residents had applied for the documents, so it was not clear that the Gali residents really wanted to participate. We responded that the regulation linking the "passport" to voting had only recently

changed, so that many residents had not had the chance to apply; we also noted that applying for the document required applicants to renounce their Georgian citizenship, which represented a difficulty for many. Chirikba admitted that applicants in other parts of Abkhazia generally do not face delays in receiving the document, but he did not explain why the other 3,000 Gali residents who have applied for the "passport" have not received it.

¶ 17. (C) In separate meetings, civil society representatives expressed similar views on the election. Representatives of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP) explained that they too had concerns about electoral fraud and therefore supported the change to accepting only the Abkhaz "passport" as an identity document. They explained further, however, that elements of the opposition, as well as elements of Abkhaz security structures, had expressed concern in principle over the extension to Gali residents of full "citizenship" rights, so the government decided not to push the issue for now. The opposition's criticism stemmed in part from basic questions about the appropriateness of extending "citizenship" to those individuals who loyalty to Abkhazia was questionable, but in part also from political expediency, because Bagapsh was widely perceived to have won in 2004 on the strength of Gali votes.

¶ 18. (C) The CHP representatives went on to suggest that the opposition would in general seize at any criticism they thought would stick, rather than articulate a coherent alternative platform. Noting that some opposition groups had already criticized the de facto authorities for conceding too much authority to Russia in the agreement establishing the Russian Border Guard presence, they said that the same opposition groups were vigorously supportive of Russia's support of Abkhazia in general.

IDP RETURNS -- NO WAY, JOSE

¶ 19. (C) All our interlocutors stiffened up at the mention of the IDP issue, and especially at the suggestion of additional returns to Abkhazia, a natural topic for the visiting PRM representative. They insisted on the need to understand the scale of the problem -- in particular, the number of potential returnees -- before Abkhazia could even begin to think about the issue. In response to questions about international principles and standards -- in particular the

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right to return and the local government's responsibility to create conditions conducive to safe, voluntary and dignified returns -- all interlocutors pointed to the bitter history of the early 1990s and the difficulty in asking current residents of most of Abkhazia to accept the return of former neighbors, some of whom may have participated in the war. They also mentioned concerns about demographics; Chirikba offered a brief history lesson on Soviet policies to dilute the ethnic Abkhaz presence by transplanting ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia. When we raised the subject with one woman, a representative of the Abkhazia Women's Association identified by an Embassy contact as a thoughtful person on IDPs, she said the issue was a question of time. She mentioned by way of example that she lived in a house abandoned by Georgians, that she does not know how she would react if those Georgians returned -- and then abruptly cut short the meeting ten minutes earlier than originally planned, thereby avoiding an extended discussion.

¶ 10. (C) Agrba resisted the notion that Abkhazia has not allowed IDPs (whom she called "refugees") to return, saying that Gali has some 50,000 returnees. Taking a combative tone, she even rejected the term "spontaneous returnees," seeming to think that it had some negative connotation (Chirikba has a similar reaction). When told it was a term of art that simply described those who return without third-party help, she objected, saying that de facto

authorities offered as much help as they could during the 1990s, even creating a commission to consider how best to help those who return. Although Agrba mentioned returns to such places as Sukhumi, Gagra and Ochamchire, she said that the de facto authorities would consider phased returns, and that Gali was the first phase. In response to a direct question, Chirikba clarified that, no, IDPs were currently not welcome to return to areas outside of Gali. He explained that the Moscow Treaty of 1994 did include a provision for the return of displaced persons, but that that process would have to be gradual, and that general returns would not be possible under current circumstances. He said that nevertheless returnees were welcome in Gali, and the Georgian government needed to admit that the individuals currently residing there were in fact returnees.

¶11. (C) Agrba also insisted that Gali residents do not face human rights restrictions, except possibly for the right to vote. She denied that they were unable to participate fully in civil society without Abkhaz "passports," for example, saying that they could buy property, register businesses, etc. with existing documents, such as the old Soviet "Form No. 9." She also insisted they faced no restrictions on crossing the administrative boundary. (Note: These claims run counter to many accounts by other credible sources. See for example ref D.)

RUSSIANS CONTINUING TO SETTLE

¶12. (C) During a visit to the village of Nabakevi (just inside the administrative boundary line, west of Zugdidi), we heard that the local school burned down in 1998 and has not been rebuilt. Since then the village has been using the former preschool as the school for all grades (1-11). Although there are fewer children in the village than there used to be (from over 200 to about 100), the current school used to be (from over 200 to about 100), the current school building is quite cramped. On the site of the former school and a football stadium, however, Russian Border Guards, who currently live in a tent encampment next to the site, have begun construction on more permanent structures. Those sites will therefore no longer be available to the village. (See ref D for information on a similar Russian encampment and construction site in Tagiloni -- incorrectly identified in that cable as Nabakevi.)

¶13. (C) UNHCR staff mentioned reports they have heard of Russian forces planning to take over the abandoned accommodations of Georgian IDPs, although they could give no specific examples. They also mentioned that the de facto authorities approached UNHCR about taking some old UNOMIG containers to use as housing for Turkish contractors, whom the Russians intended to bring in to work on construction projects. We expressed the opinion that it would be inappropriate for any UN entity to provide direct support to Russian efforts to establish itself further in Abkhazia.

BASS